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AUTHOR Bauer, Norman J.
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ABSTRACT

Debates about flag desecration present sensitive issues. This opinion paper examines the defeat of the flag burning amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would have read "The Congress and the States shall have power to prohibit the physical desecration of the flag of the United States." The most talked about points in the congressional debates are identified, along with the issue that was not discussed nearly enough--that of the flag as a symbol. The flag represents the core values in society to worship freely, express one's views, vote, and participate in associations of one's choosing. Burning the flag "does not mitigate the significance of such cherished, core values." What is more important in the whole debate is that educators strive to teach students about the core values the flag represents. (JAG)

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Social Foundations of Education and the Debate About Flag Desecration

Norman J. Bauer

Emeritus Professor of Social Foundations of Education
State University of New York
Geneseo, New York

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SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION AND THE DEBATE ABOUT FLAG DESECRATION

Norman J. Bauer

Emeritus Professor of Social Foundations of Education

State University of New York

Geneseo, New York

January, 1996

Despite vigorous lobbying by the American Legion and the Citizens Flag Alliance, fully aware that their Congressional colleagues in the House had overwhelmingly approved amending the nation's constitutional charter last spring by a vote of 312-120, with full knowledge that every state but Vermont had already adopted resolutions supporting it, and with a clear understanding of the Supreme Court's 1989 ruling that flag-burning can be interpreted as a protected form of free speech under the First Amendment, the members of the U.S. Senate, on December 12th, revealed, albeit by a narrow margin, an exceptionally rare measure of courage and reflective thought when they voted 63-36 against approval of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution which would have read: *The Congress and the States shall have power to prohibit the physical desecration of the flag of the United States.* The result was three votes shy of the two-thirds majority needed for approving what would have been the the 28th amendment to the U.S. Constitution had it subsequently been ratified by three-quarters of the states.

A number of claims which seem to have had an impact on the final outcome

surfaced during the debate. Among the more salient were (a) the flag is a beloved symbol of the American people; (b) the flag reveals a sense of national community; (c) a simple law prohibiting flag burning would be more appropriate; and (d) the amendment could lead to serious consequences at the state level where the notion of physical desecration would have to be interpreted.

Conspicuously absent from this list, though not surprisingly, was the all-important matter of conceptual clarity about the flag as a 'symbol'. Surveys attest to the fact that a large majority of the citizens in our nation, most of whom engaged in a daily recitation of our pledge of allegiance throughout their primary and secondary schooling, have acquired an incorrect, reified frame of reference about the nature of a symbol, in this case our flag, and the empirical reality which this symbol entails. Just as with all symbols, the flag is a *representation* of what Bruner would call the 'enactive' world of empirical experience. Symbols are not themselves the actual experience.

Correctly understood, our flag represents the core values in our society - such values as, for instance, the right to worship freely or not at all, to read or view whatever we wish, to express our views regardless of how unique, perhaps even repugnant, they might be, to praticipate in associations of our own choosing, to express our grievances, to vote, to due process. Burning or desecrating our flag in any way whatever does not mitigate the significance of such cherished, core values.

It is true, perhaps, that such acts may offend the images and expectations of many of our citizens because of the thoughtless, almost always passive, reification to which many have been subjected, but clearly none of us will be any less able to participate in our society as free citizens as a consequence of such acts. Indeed, we might even grow a bit in our understanding of, and sympathy for, the causes for such behavior when it does occur.

One consequence of this flag desecration debate for teacher educators,

particularly for foundations scholars, ought to be a renewed understanding of the imortance of foundational knowledge (what Broudy has termed 'knowledge with') skills, and habits of mind for all school personnel, particularly teachers and administrators in our elementary and secondary schools, both public and private. They above all need to facilitate the ***de***reification of our young people in their classroom discourse about the real meaning of our national symbol, the U.S. Flag.

Students need continually to be reminded of our nation's core constitutional values when they recite the pledge of allegiance. School people need to acquire those habits of thought which induce them to emphasize and reemphasize to their students the understanding that when we recite our pledge we are in effect committing ourselves to a belief in, and a respect for, these core values in our liberal democratic society. If such understanding is not systematically taught to prospective teachers and administrators in the social foundations of education where else in the two-pronged curriculum of teacher preparation (educology and pedagogy) is it likely to be acquired?